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ABSTRACT

This monograph summarizes lessons learned from the 5 years that the Together We're Better (TWB) program worked to create inclusive learning environments in four Minnesota school districts. Each of the partner districts established a collaborative core planning team to provide leadership and management of efforts toward school change and inclusive school community development. These teams consistently reported five "lessons." These lessons are each explained with specific suggestions for implementation. The lessons are: (1) some of the best "learning" occurred during times of relaxation; (2) the tone of the team can change dramatically with the entrance or exit of a single person; (3) the size of the core planning team is important; (4) overtly seeking other perspectives and questioning assumptions are keys to success; and (5) attention to effective team practices is essential. (DB)

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Lessons on Team Dynamics

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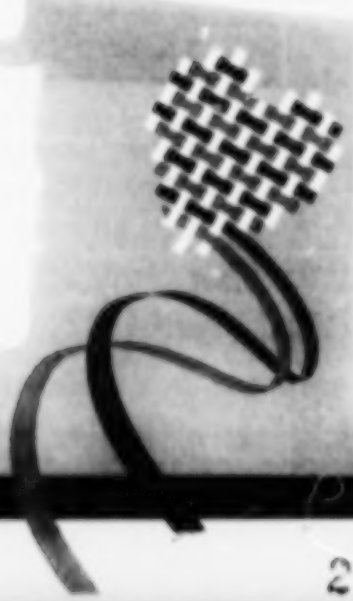

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Introduction

For five years the Together We're Better Program (TWB) worked with schools in Minnesota to create inclusive learning environments where all members of the school community participated in decision-making for well-planned change. Program staff worked in partnership with four school districts to apply a systemic design to the process of developing inclusive school communities. Because the systemic change work was accomplished together, the four schools are called *district partners* of TWB. Through this experience, important lessons related to teaming were learned. These lessons are shared here.

Although some of the lessons are small, they are significant in that they do not align with conventional wisdom related to effective teaming. How often have you been on a team that pays attention to "fun and relaxation," not just checking off tasks? And what about the idea that stable team membership isn't all it is cracked up to be — that people come and go, and that can be good? Does "the more the merrier" seem like an invitation or challenge related to collaborative team size? How about seek *first* to understand, *then* to be understood?

We learned that in striving to be an effective team, it is critical to stop and ask one another, "How are we doing?" And the lessons we've learned have led us to respond in ways that may depart from the conventional wisdom we once followed. So, "Hey, we see it differently" and hope these perspectives will be useful to you in enhancing the effectiveness of the teams of which you are a member.

Lessons Learned

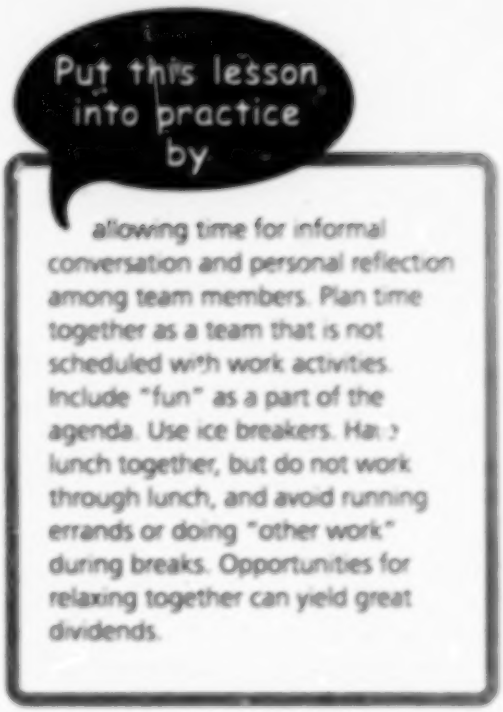
Each of the districts TWB staff partnered with began by establishing a collaborative *core planning team*. The core planning team provided leadership and management of efforts toward school change and inclusive school community development. Each district sought members for its core planning team who were from diverse backgrounds and representative of persons interested in the schools. Membership included administrators, teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, community members, and students. The core planning team generally met on a monthly basis to explore new ideas, to learn, to assess progress toward systemic change, and to implement various action plans. Although these teams had consistent membership, there were times when additional persons were invited to participate in the team's work. For example, if an action plan could be strengthened by support from local businesses, local business leaders were invited to join the core planning team. Likewise, there were times when the team members met to work in small action teams. These action teams devoted concentrated effort toward the completion of specific tasks.

Together We're Better learned some important lessons about establishing and maintaining effective core planning teams. These lessons occurred when teams worked on issues related to change, such as gathering data that showed the district's current status on critical issues, developing a vision, or identifying action steps toward making the vision the new reality. The following lessons were consistently experienced by the four districts that worked in partnership with TWB staff.

Lesson 1: Some of the best "learning" occurred during times of relaxation

When team members are together and not completing a specific task or creating a product, they are free to think differently about information. This phenomena is called *flexible creativity* and metacognition theory explains it this way: When the brain synapses are not focused specifically, but allowed general access to the long-term memory, unique connections can be formed between old knowledge and new learning. Creativity is formed by the flexible movement of electrical impulses through the brain (Glover & Bruning, 1987).

Together We're Better staff were partnered with district core planning teams that came to learn the value of relaxed thinking. Members began to understand information in a new way when together, but not "officially working." Another result of having relaxed time together as a team was the strengthening of personal relationships. As team members felt stronger personal connections, trust built. Personal trust helped teams to work through disagreements toward acceptable solutions. Regardless of the why or how, when core planning team members were allowed time to relax, often something new was learned or something old was learned in a new way.


Put this lesson into practice by
allowing time for informal conversation and personal reflection among team members. Plan time together as a team that is not scheduled with work activities. Include "fun" as a part of the agenda. Use ice breakers. Have lunch together, but do not work through lunch, and avoid running errands or doing "other work" during breaks. Opportunities for relaxing together can yield great dividends.

Lesson 2: The tone of the team can change dramatically with the entrance or exit of a single person

Teams take on specific characteristics as they develop into working organisms. As members come to trust and value one another, they can settle into comfortable patterns of interaction. This can help a team bond, but also may allow the team to stagnate. When this occurs, a new member may change interactions, resulting in new life within the group. Although some members may find this change unwelcome, it can produce positive results.

In working with district teams, we found that when a new member joined a core planning team, it was necessary to take time to integrate that person as a member and provide information related to the team's work. This meant that current members had to review the past, reframe what was important to the vision, and clarify past successes, failures, and current actions. This type of review allowed the team members to see things differently (with hindsight) and was part of the positive effect of adding new members.

When a member exited a core planning team, it was common to acknowledge that person's contributions to the team, thus creating a time of celebration. Also, as a member resigned other members accepted different tasks or roles within the team. Often, the altering of responsibilities resulted in altered perspectives. The celebration of accomplishments and assuming different responsibilities resulted in changing interactions, which often gave new life to the team.

Put this lesson into practice by

purposely involving new members periodically. New members are often the catalyst for reviewing the team's vision, examining the success and failure of past and current goals, celebrating the work of the team, and examining and perhaps altering the roles and responsibilities of team members. Regardless of changes in team composition, these are important activities to engage in as a team.

Lesson 3: The size of the core planning team is important

Both small and large teams offer advantages and disadvantages. Consider, for example —

- Small groups can build trust quickly and allow all members to actively participate in meetings. Establishing team trust and fostering leadership by all members can result in firm leadership for the district because core planning team members feel supported and empowered.
- Larger groups can have greater impact throughout the district, but larger groups require more skilled facilitators.
- A smaller core planning team may provide more incentives or privileges to each member because it requires fewer resources.
- But, members of a small core planning team may become overwhelmed with the work related to systemic change. The larger the team, the more people available to share the workload.

In working with district teams, we found that large core planning team meetings required preparation by smaller management/leadership teams called *steering committees*. Several TWB core planning teams had representatives from each building within the district. Although this resulted in large teams, the benefit was immediate communication to all buildings on the latest plans toward creating more inclusive school districts.

In one district, the decision was made to keep the core planning team relatively small (eight members) to promote trust and enrich the learning of leadership skills (e.g. setting agendas, delegation, reaching consensus) by participants. However, within the first year members realized that the district was too large to be affected in a significant way by only eight members. A decision was made to promote collaboration between general and special education by recruiting a team of teachers from each building in the district. Also, there was a desire to have more input from parents of students with disabilities. These two decisions resulted in a large increase in the size of the core planning team. The balance between individual growth of core planning team members and long-term impact on the system was reached by expanding the team and using a steering committee to provide leadership and organization.

Put this lesson into practice by

carefully considering what perspectives need to be represented on the team. Use a steering committee to insure planning and follow-up for team meetings. Try to be conscious about the benefits and challenges inherent in large or small groups. Based on this awareness, try to be intentional about team composition, communication strategies, etc. Finally, periodically revisit the present structure to see if it remains the best form for meeting needs. Be open to changes in team structure and size over time.

Lesson 4: Overtly seeking other perspectives and questioning assumptions are keys to success

Together We're Better coordinators drew heavily from Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Habit 5, "Seek first to understand and then to be understood," was especially important. All people see the world not as *it is* but as *they are*. Our personal experiences, values, and beliefs provide screens through which we view all events. It requires a personal commitment to listen to and understand other people's viewpoints. Once you understand, the other half begins, "...seeking to be understood." Communication involves both acknowledging and understanding another perspective and clearly stating your perspective.

The core planning team of one district wanted to be a support to all of the buildings in the district. One goal was to support inclusive education initiatives at the high school. This goal was placed on the core planning team agenda month after month, but was never addressed. Finally the team agreed that although the goal was worthy, there were insufficient resources to achieve the outcome. This reopened the door to a discussion of priorities related to the team's vision. Decisions were made about which goals to keep working toward and which ones to let go of for the moment. This overt discussion resulted in stronger team unity, effort, and effectiveness.

Put this lesson into practice by

engaging in behaviors intended to support understanding (e.g., summarizing action on agenda items before proceeding; restating the other person's perspective accurately before sharing your own). Periodically revisit team goals and overtly discuss their importance and effectiveness in addressing the team's vision.

Lesson 5: Attention to effective team practices is essential

Teams are more likely to be successful if they take time to identify and implement strategies that support members in working together to achieve goals. Strategies may involve establishing expectations for team member interaction; creating routines for recurring tasks such as setting the agenda, facilitating meetings, and maintaining records; and engaging in ongoing learning about inclusive school communities, systemic change, and team effectiveness.

As each district's core planning team was formulated, it established community expectations and decided upon processes that would best foster team efficiency, effectiveness, and individual empowerment. Each member first identified group expectations necessary for his or her personal involvement. Members expressed things like "beginning and ending on time," "listening to all opinions," and, "follow-through between meetings." Expectations were amended and revised until all members agreed on the list. These community expectations were then posted at each core planning team meeting.

Each core planning team created a system for setting agendas, facilitating meetings, keeping records, and evaluating team efficiency. For example, some core planning teams rotated facilitation among all members, while others elected one person or a partnership of people to facilitate meetings. Some core planning teams began each meeting by setting the agenda while others distributed an agenda prior to the meeting time. Most core planning team members shared the responsibility of keeping the meeting minutes and evaluating team efficiency and effectiveness.

Local team members designed practices to enhance effectiveness. For example, the core planning team for one district used the *Seven Norms of Collaborative Teams* by Garmston and Wellman (1997) (i.e., pausing, paraphrasing, probing, etc.) by selecting one or two norms to focus on at each meeting. During the meeting, team members were encouraged to use the selected norm appropriately. One team member was identified as the process observer and kept data on the use of the norms. At the close of the meetings the observer facilitated a team discussion on the featured norm and the group's overall effectiveness in adhering to it. In addition, TWB staff offered resources and training on effective team practices.

Put this lesson into practice by

making a team commitment to improve the use of effective collaborative team skills. Establish community expectations and be explicit about the structures that will be used to establish agendas, facilitate and record meetings, and process team functioning.

Conclusion

The lessons learned on team dynamics by Together We're Better staff and district partners appear to be small when considered in isolation but, when mixed into the process of systemic change and creating an inclusive school environment, they can make a large difference. These lessons are shared here because they provide a different way to look at practices affecting successful team dynamics. There are many excellent resources focused on effective collaborative teaming practices, some of which we have identified for you in the resource list. Hey, we see it differently and hope the perspectives shared will enhance the effectiveness of the collaborative teams in which you have membership.

Resources

Friend, M., & Cook L. (1996). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals* (2nd edition), White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers USA.

Garmston, R., & Wellman, B. (1997). *The adaptive school: Developing and facilitating collaborative groups* (2nd edition). El Dorado Hills, CA: Four Hats Press.

Rainforth, B., & York-Barr, J. (1997). *Collaborative teams for students with severe disabilities: Integrating therapy and educational services* (2nd edition), Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Scholtes, P.R., et.al. (1988). *The team handbook: How to use teams to improve quality* Madison, WI: Joiner Associates Inc.

Thousand, J.S., & Villa, R.A. (1992). Collaborative teams: A powerful tool in school restructuring. In R.A. Villa, J.S. Thousand, W. Stainback, & S. Stainback, *Restructuring for caring and effective education: An administrative guide to creating heterogeneous schools* (pp. 73-108). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Other *Together We're Better* Publications. . .

Weaving Tapestries of Inclusion: Seven Threads to Strengthen School Membership

by T. Vandercook

This booklet describes lessons learned through a multi-year research project that sought ways to weave the tapestry of educational inclusion for students with disabilities in the context of general education reform efforts. It explores seven threads of inclusion: Contribution, Commitment, Complexity, Circle of Influence, Communication, Courage-Consideration, and Collaboration. Through describing these threads and how they were found to be essential to lasting inclusion, the booklet offers a framework and direction for educators seeking to create inclusive school communities in which all students experience belonging. (1999).

A Preferred Future Worksheet: A Process for School Teams

by L. Meluetz, T. Vandercook, and G. Hegarson

This worksheet and instruction guide provide a planning tool that can help teams analyze the current situation, identify a preferred future, and create a plan of action. It includes tips for forming teams and facilitating the process, as well as detailed directions for each step in developing a plan for achieving a preferred future in relation to an issue or problem. (1998).

Lessons for Understanding: An Elementary School Curriculum on Perspective-Taking

by T. Vandercook, L. Meluetz, J. Montie, P. Taylor, and K. Scaletta

A curriculum developed for grades K–5 to increase student understanding and appreciation of different perspectives, leading to respect for diversity and support for truly inclusive school communities. The 24 lessons are clustered in four units: My Perspective, Other Perspectives, Understanding Conflict, and Working Together. The curriculum is designed to be used in classrooms where students with and without disabilities learn together, and suggested adap.. tions are included. A unique feature is a focus on strengthening home-school partnerships. The lessons make use of 19 storybooks available through most bookstores and libraries. (1997).

Lessons for Understanding: A Junior High and High School Curriculum on Perspective-Taking

by L. Walz, M. Nelson, and K. Scaletta

A curriculum developed for secondary students to increase student understanding and appreciation of different perspectives, leading to respect for diversity and support for truly inclusive school communities. The 20 lessons are clustered in four units: My Perspective — Understanding Perspectives and Where They Come From; Other Perspectives — Developing Awareness of Different Perspectives, Accepting Others — Developing Skills and Attitudes for Valuing Different Perspectives; and Working Together — Applying Perspective-Taking Skills to Improve Solutions. (1998).

Teacher Efficacy in Heterogeneous Fifth and Sixth Grade Classrooms

by R. Kronberg

A report that breaks new ground in examining teachers' in-depth descriptions of the contextual relationships between heterogeneous classrooms, teacher efficacy, and teaching and learning. This study followed four teachers, seeking to understand how they view the relationship between personal teaching efficacy and teaching and learning. (1998).

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